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SUBJECT: SYRIA FRAMES HARIRI VISIT AS NEW PAGE IN RELATIONS

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Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri completed on December 20 a two-day visit to Damascus, the first by a Lebanese prime minister to Damascus since the 2005 assassination of Hariri's father. Both sides described the visit as "fruitful and productive," while diplomats and Syrian contacts stressed its symbolism. The Lebanese Embassy reported the talks between Hariri and Asad focused on border demarcation, weapons flows to Palestinian refugee camps, the treatment of Syrian workers in Lebanon, Lebanese press treatment of Syria, and the peace process. While Hariri told the press he did not discuss with Asad his father's assassination or the UN-led inquiry into the killing, he remarked that the matter was in the hands of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. While Syrian newspapers hailed Hariri's visit as evidence Lebanon and Syria had put the past behind them, the December 21 shooting of a bus carrying Syrian workers in northern Lebanon came as an unwelcome coda to Hariri's Damascus trip. END SUMMARY.

SARG HAILS MUCH-ANTICIPATED HARIRI VISIT

¶2. (C) SARG statements and government-run newspapers praised Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri's December 19-20 visit to Syria as symbolic of improved relations between the two countries. President Asad described his talks with Hariri as "restoring cooperation between the governments of Syria and Lebanon," and Hariri called the talks "excellent and productive." Syrian newspapers stressed the visit would allow the two countries "to put the past behind them."

¶3. (C) The Lebanese Embassy reported Asad and Hariri spent several hours over four separate sessions closeted together with few advisors during the two-day visit. On Saturday, they dined together at a nearby restaurant (to which Asad reportedly drove Hariri in his own car). The Lebanese Embassy said the men focused on border demarcation, weapons flows to Palestinian refugee camps, Syrian workers in Lebanon, Lebanese press commentary on Syria, and the peace process during their talks.

¶4. (C) The Egyptian embassy told us the Lebanese ambassador reported Asad and Hariri discussed the 2005 assassination of Hariri's father, the late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, and agreed on the importance of bringing the killers to justice. Hariri, however, told the media he did not discuss his father's murder with Asad. "The tribunal is doing its work and this is what everybody wishes," he stated, noting that President Asad had publicly agreed with this position.

¶5. (C) While there were no specific deliverables, the Lebanese Embassy related the two sides achieved progress on several bilateral issues during the visit. Asad reportedly agreed to name Syrian representatives to a joint committee addressing border demarcation issues. FM Muallim and other

advisors cautioned Asad (whom Hariri described as flexible on this issue, according to the Lebanese here) that Syria was currently in the process of demarcating borders with Jordan and Turkey. Asad reportedly responded that there was no reason not to move forward with establishing the bilateral committee.

¶6. (C) Hariri reportedly raised problems posed by the flow of weapons into Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, saying he planned to raise this issue with Palestinian groups. Asad reportedly replied he would be open to discussing this issue in further detail and was open in principle to assisting.

¶7. (C) Hariri also reportedly mentioned to Asad the troublesome optic caused by Syria's continuing reliance on the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council. He pointed out that Asad's recent meeting with Higher Council Secretary General Nassri Khoury, followed by Khoury's trip to Lebanon to discuss what Asad said with Lebanese reporters, created an image that did not reflect normal diplomatic relations between two states. Hariri reportedly said he favored maintaining many of the bilateral agreements administered under the Higher Council (many of which benefited Syria), but he expressed his hope that each country's embassy would assume a greater role in the future. (Hariri reportedly insisted that his press conference take place at the Lebanese embassy to stress the presence of an embassy in Damascus, and, according to the Lebanese ambassador, sought the latter's attendance at several events for the same reason).

¶8. (C) Asad mentioned negative statements about Syria coming from the Lebanese press and from some March 14

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reporters and argued such statements hurt efforts to improve bilateral relations. Hariri replied that the Lebanese press, like the March 14 coalition, represented a wide spectrum of views that would be impossible to silence. Hariri maintained this freedom of expression was a part of Lebanese life that had to be managed and pledged to urge his political allies and journalists to consider the positive benefits of better Syrian-Lebanese relations. (Note: Hariri urged reporters covering his press conference outside the Lebanese Embassy to do this.) Asad also raised concerns about the treatment of Syrian workers in Lebanon, and Hariri agreed the Lebanese government would look into the Syrian concerns. Regarding the peace process, both leaders reportedly agreed the "Lebanese track" and the "Syrian track" should be linked and the two countries would approach the peace process "with one voice."

LEGACY OF BILATERAL TENSION REMAINS

¶9. (C) The Lebanese ambassador told Arab diplomats the Lebanese believe the SARG is divided between those who would treat Lebanon as an equal partner and those who are reluctant to recognize Lebanese sovereignty. An Egyptian diplomat said Syrian Labor Minister Ghada al-Jabi and Information Minister Muhsin Bilal are among the Syrian cabinet members the Lebanese do not trust. A Jordanian diplomat said Lebanese contacts told his embassy members of the Lebanese delegation privately complained about the "old guard" in the SARG that remained opposed to the opening of a Syrian embassy in Beirut.

BUS CARRYING SYRIAN WORKERS ATTACKED IN LEBANON

¶10. (C) A bus carrying Syrian workers was attacked in northern Lebanon on December 21, the day after Hariri concluded his visit. The attack occurred near a Lebanese army checkpoint outside Tripoli. The bus was ferrying Syrian workers along the main highway between northern Lebanon and Syria. Initial media reports stated a 17-year-old Syrian boy was killed in the attack. FM Muallim, in Aleppo, issued a statement condemning the attack. Hariri and President Sleiman also issued condemnations. Syrian newspapers reported on December 22 Muallim called Lebanese Foreign

Minister Ali Shami and Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council Secretary General Khouri requesting Syria be informed regarding the results of the Lebanese investigation into the shooting.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: In a carefully staged visit designed to play up personal ties between the two leaders, Asad offered several gestures to make this visit special -- including hosting Hariri at the presidential guest palace, usually reserved for heads of state. In return for Hariri's public remarks putting Lebanon and Syria on the same side in a common struggle against Israel, Syrian commentators refrained from criticizing Hariri, though some Syrian shopkeepers and taxi drivers were not as flattering in sharing their negative views about Hariri. This visit also represented a solid step by Damascus to erase some of the stigma associated with Syria's suspected role in the murder of Saad's father, Rafiq Hariri. Whether Asad will follow through with offers to help Hariri succeed remains to be seen. From Syria's vantage, Hariri's visit represents a deliverable promised by Asad to Saudi King Abdullah and will be used to refute accusations of Syrian interference in Lebanese affairs.

HUNTER